

St. John's Church
N.E. Corner 17th & H Sts., N.W.
Washington, D. C.

HABS No. DC-19

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Washington, D. C.

Historic American Buildings Survey
Delos H. Smith, District Officer
1707 Eye St., N.W., Washington, D.C.

ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
Washington, D.C.

Owner: St. John's Episcopal Parish.

Date of Erection: 1816. Enlarged in 1820. Additions and changes in 1833, 1842 and 1883.

Architect: Benjamin H. Latrobe.

Builder: (Construction supervised by Latrobe)

Present Condition: In good repair. Present church is considerably larger than original and presents a much different appearance, although most of it dates before 1845.

Number of Stories: One main story with galleries. Tower and cupola.

Materials of Construction: Walls are brick, stuccoed. Other construction is wood frame.

Other Existing Records: Original working drawings by Latrobe, in the possession of the Parish.

Printed Material: Jonathon Elliott, "History of D. C.", 1831.
"History of the National Capitol", W.G. Bryan,
N. Y., 1916.

Columbia Historical Association: see "History
and Reminiscences of St. John's Church,"
1816-05 by Alexander B. Hagner.

Journal of Latrobe, B.H. Latrobe (Introduction
by S.H.B.L.) Appleton, 1905.

Additional Data: From "Reference List of Historic Buildings in the
District of Columbia" by Delos H. Smith, 1937.

"Well maintained. Original plan of church represented Greek Cross of four equal arms, at the intersection of which stood massive columns supporting the dome and lantern. Circular gallery upheld by columns subtended the north, west and south transepts. East arm occupied by the chancel. Principal door on 16th St., and another door originally in center of south transept on H St. Aisles were paved with brick. Walls are stucco on brick. Excellent example of classic revival designed by Benjamin Latrobe,

and constructed under his superintendence. Consecrated by Bishop Kemp of Maryland, Dec. 17, 1816. In 1820 the church was enlarged by extending the west transept into a nave abutting on 16th St., according to supplementary plans of Latrobe. Portico and steeple added at this time. Stained glass windows added and extensive changes made in 1833. Pews changed in 1842. Estimated value of St. John's Church in 1830 - \$20,000."

References: "National Intelligencer" Vol. 12.

"The Evening Star", articles by James Croggon, The Rambler (Mr. Shawn), and John Clagett Proctor.

FROM: "Benjamin Henry Latrobe and his Churches", a paper read by Thomas T. Waterman at St. John's Church, Washington, February 10, 1939.

"The original form of St. John's was the perfect exposition of his ideas, both practical and artistic, in church building. The plan was cruciform, with equal arms, such as the cross of the Eastern Church displayed. The north and south transepts are exactly as he planned them, and they were repeated to the east for the chancel and to the west for the nave. These shallow arms extending from a central rotunda provided the close knit, unobstructed space he required. The communion table he placed against the east wall, not even in a projecting bay, and enclosed it by a closely set communion rail. Directly in front of the communion table in the center of the chancel arch he set the pulpit, entirely visible by all of the congregation. The gallery was not at all as at present, but was circular in form repeating the line of the dome above. This gallery filled the nave, transepts and even one-half of the chancel, extending as it did to the east wall on either side of the communion table. The organ was then over the west door in the gallery.

"Just what suggested this very unusual plan to him is hard to say, but in London there are several churches by Wren that employ the Greek cross scheme, but in all cases the plan is square with the dome carried on columns at the crossing. The Pantheon in London built by Watt in 1770 is a closer parallel, though much larger. This building has the same cruciform ground plan, with galleries in the arms of the cross. Another possibility as to the source is in the Chapel at Aylot St. Lawrence, Herefordshire, built by Nicholas Revett. This is a parallel to the original plan of St. John's, though it has a large eastern apse, and a western narthex and portico, as St. John's now has through an alteration. Last, but not the most impossible source of the design, knowing as we do that Latrobe traveled in Europe, is in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, an 8th century building. Except for the fact that the nave of this building is longer than the other arms it is a complete exposition of the design elements of St. John's, both in plan and elevation.

"A drawing in the Library of Congress by Latrobe indicates St. John's Church in the distance of a view of the White House. It shows the four equal arms of the building covered by pediments and the crossing rising above the pediments. The square of the crossing is covered, as at present, by a hipped roof from which springs the cupola. This is precisely the arrangement of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, except that the cupola is lacking.

"The use of a cupola here is very interesting as we have Latrobe's own comments on the subject of cupolas in the letter to Jefferson in which he expounded his principles of architecture. He wrote, 'In respect to the general subject of cupolas, I do not think they are always, nor even often, ornamental the need of a belfry which is an Eastern accession to our religious buildings, renders them necessary appendages to the church, yet I cannot admit that because the Greeks and Romans did not place elevated cupolas upon their temples, they may not when necessary be also rendered beautiful. The question would be as to its real or apparent utility in the place where it appeared; for nothing can be beautiful which appears useless or unmeaning. If our climate was such as to admit of the light of an open orifice in the crown of a dome, as at the Pantheon [at Rome], I would never put a cupola or any spherical dome. It is not the ornament but the use I want.' We can see, then, that St. John's as originally built was Latrobe's thesis on church building. Unfortunately the building was not adequate for the needs of a growing congregation or for the revival of the English liturgy. In 1820, only five years after the first plans were made, the nave was extended to the west, with vestibules, portico, and tower, all previously lacking. The tradition of Latrobe's authorship of the new west end is persistent, but many things about the design do not substantiate the tradition. In its original form the scale of the building was excellent, but now it has a strange feeling of being dwarfed. This, perhaps, is due to the breaking up of the design into a great many units. For instance, originally Latrobe had single windows in the side walls; in the extension these were changed to triple windows and many more added. The south door was removed and a triple window added, as well as those in the nave. Perhaps the most serious defect of the design is in the spacing of the columns of the portico. There are six where there should be four, and as in Revett's comparable church in Herefordshire there actually are. The reason why the columns appear to be larger than they really are is ^{that} because the lintels they bear are much shorter than they could be. It was not the Classic idea to have as many columns as possible, but to have as few as their materials would allow. Therefore, the span from column to column was as wide as the stone lintel would permit, which is obviously not the case with St. John's portico.

"The interior of the church shows the results of successive changes, ranging in date, except for the chancel, from 1820 to 1840.

Both gallery and pews are of the later Classic Revival period, the east iron column capitals having the lotus petals and the pew end ornaments the honeysuckle and the acanthus leaf. The stained glass windows are of course an addition and mainly date from 1883."

From notes submitted by Delos H. Smith,
Thomas T. Waterman and Frederick D.
Nichols, 1937-1939.

Approved: May 1939 JHJ.

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
LAFAYETTE SQUARE

Location: On the north side of Lafayette Square, northeast corner of 16th and H Streets, NW, Washington, D. C.

Present Owner: St. John's Parish, Episcopal Church, 1525 H Street, NW, Washington, D. C.

Present Occupant: St. John's Parish, Episcopal Church.

Present Use: Church Services.

Brief Statement of Significance: The original portion (1816) with the major addition (1820) is one of the older existing churches of the city. The central dome and transepts have been modified little from the original work of Benjamin H. Latrobe, and the building is a notable example of the Classical Revival (Graeco-Roman) Period. Soon after its opening a pew was assigned to the family of President James Madison, and he and the next five presidents attended regularly. Since that time it has been known as "the Church of the Presidents", and it is associated with many figures and events of the National Capital. In 1961 it was designated a National Historical Landmark.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Ownership: The first vestry of the Parish of St. John's Episcopal Church was elected in 1816, and the building has been used for church services continuously since its opening in December 1816.
2. Date of Erection: The cornerstone was laid February 16, 1816, and the church was completed and consecrated in December of that year. /Vestry Records, extracted by Peter V. Hagner in Report of the Committee on Stained Glass, St. John's Church, Washington, D. C. 1883/.

3. Architect: For the original church (of Greek Cross plan) Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764-1820) prepared the plans, specifications and contracts in 1815, and supervised the construction in 1816. For his work he refused compensation; the vestry offered him a pew free of rent, but this he also declined. Later he accepted an inscribed silver goblet for his services /Vestry Records/.

Builder: Richard Skinner of Washington, D. C., signed a contract dated September 1, 1815 for the carpentry work, said work to be executed for the sum of five thousand dollars. /Available in the church records, reprinted in the Journal of the American Institute of Architects, December 1954/. Information on specifications and contracts for other work not available.

4. Original plans, construction, etc.: A sheet of the original plan, signed by Benjamin H. Latrobe and showing ground floor, floor framing and balcony, is available. /framed in the Rector's office/. The original structure, a Greek plan with equal arms, had a small vestry room added behind the shallow chancel. A photographic view of the chancel, dated 1860 (?) indicates that the vestry room had been enlarged more than the Latrobe plan of 1816 prescribed.

Hamlin wrote, "St. John's is a little masterpiece It had a superb and commanding unity. It made no pretensions, yet every dimension was so perfectly related to every other, every part so right, that the whole became much more than the sum of its parts. And the detail, if we may judge by the existing proportions, had the same quality of elegant simplicity. He (the architect) was proud of the building And he took the occasion (its completion) to write for the church its dedication hymn." /Benjamin Henry Latrobe by Talbot Hamlin/.

In 1883 the Rector, Reverend William A. Leonard, described the church as it had appeared in earlier years, "Few there are in our midst who remember its quaint, simple and original exterior and interior, of many years back.

Its four square transepts, its circular gallery running entirely around the building within, over the Holy Table, and enclosing the theater-like spaces below; its queer little Organ perched high upon the eastern (?) wall, its wine glass Pulpit on wheels; its double decked Prayer Desk; its high backed, square family pews; its brick alleys and its circular aisles. Old fashioned wood stoves gave heat to the building, and sperm candles and oil lamps gave light to the worshippers." /Address Delivered at the Reopening of St. John's Church, November 4, 1883, by Reverend William A. Leonard/.

5. Alterations and additions:

a. Period 1820-1822. In a public meeting in July 1820 the pew holders decided that it was expedient to enlarge the church "according to the plan of Mr. Latrobe, but that with the gallery over the whole new part". The nave was to be extended westward to the building line 16th Street, and the portico on that front, with the tower to be commenced as soon as practicable. /Vestry Records/.

It cannot be definitely established who was responsible for the design of the addition of the nave, portico and tower. Benjamin Latrobe had departed in 1818 from the Washington-Baltimore area; he died of yellow fever in New Orleans on September 13, 1820. His son, John H. B. Latrobe, wrote, "My father designed St. John's Church, Washington, which was really a beautiful little thing in its day, before some dull fellow made a Roman Cross out of a Greek one, and stuck on a stupid, nondescript portico and an abominable pretext for a tower". /John H. B. Latrobe and his Times by J. E. Semmes/. Messrs. J. H. Gillis and James Thompson (vestrymen) were appointed to attend to the building of the addition. The enlargement added 24 new pews on the ground floor and 18 in the gallery; the cost of the new addition was "about \$5,000". /Vestry Records/.

The bell, installed in the tower at this time, is marked "Revere Boston 1822", and was cast in the foundry of Joseph W. Revere, son, who succeeded Paul Revere. Revere Bells by Edward C. and Evelyn Stickney, Bedford, Mass. 1961/. It is 34" in diameter and 28" high, weighs 967 pounds; its excellent, clear tone announces the hours of daily and Sunday worship, and it is sounded on occasions of national interest.

b. Period 1836-1869. In 1836 the south transept door of the church was closed, and replaced with the central window on the main floor; two new pews were thus added. (The side windows on the south face of this transept, ground and balcony levels, were added in the 20th century). A new organ was installed in 1839 and with it accommodations for the choir were provided in the west gallery. Vestry Records/. In 1842 major alterations were made in the interior. "A cellar sufficiently large to accommodate furnaces was excavated under the central part of the church, and the stoves were removed..... A board floor was laid about a foot above the level of the old brick pavement. The raising of the new floor marred the exterior of the church by making necessary a step at the entrance above the line of the water table. It further injured the interior by diminishing the already too low space under the galleries; and by placing the base of the windows, which had been added to the original design of the church, at a level too low for the convenience of the people" Report of the Committee on Stained Glass, 1883/. The original form of the galleries in the central area as designed by Latrobe was changed to the design now in place; new access to the galleries was constructed. The old-style high box pews were changed to the low-backed seating still in use today. The chancel was enlarged (apparently by extending further into the central area), but the building was not enlarged at this time. The wine-glass pulpit was replaced. In 1845 Reverend William Hawley, rector since 1817, died and his remains were

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interred alongside the wall on the north side of the chancel; the grave is now marked in the floor of the present basement, under the organ loft, and a marble tablet was placed in the church /Vestry records/.

In 1865 a sum of \$5,783.94 was spent for repairs of the church; \$2,000.00 for the installation of a new organ /Vestry records/. "In the general repairs of the church which took place in 1869 some further changes were made in the chancel, in order to better adapt it to the service of the church; but the building itself was not enlarged. At the same time the interior was elaborately decorated (stenciled) in tones of mingled grays and violets, and the windows were stained by the decorator in patterns of ivy leaf in grayish white". Decorations were done by John P. Wies of New York /Report of the Committee on Stained Glass, 1883/.

c. Period 1881-1900. In 1881 the vestry determined to make an enlargement of the church. At their request Mr. James Renwick of the firm of Renwick, Aspinwall and Russell of New York visited Washington. Plans were prepared, but work did not begin until June 1883. At that time a committee was appointed "with authority forthwith to enlarge the church on Mr. Renwick's plans. These plans, as modified by the vestry, contemplated the extension of the chancel to the east line of the lot; the construction of an organ room to the north of the new chancel; the construction of a two-story building to the north of the organ to contain a robing room below and a study above for the Rector; a one-story addition to the south of the chancel to contain chairs for the persons wishing to hire single seats; a new broad aisle between the pews and the chancel, with an exit on H Street; and the pews in the gallery in the nave in the place before occupied by the organ and choir. It did not contemplate the lowering of the floor of the church to the original level.it was found that the amount of the cost would be greater than the vestry would be warranted in spending". /Report of the Committee on Stained Glass, 1883/. In this rearrangement and

replacement of the pews 180 seatings were added, making a total of 780. In extending the chancel the Palladian window over the altar was constructed; marble steps and tile floor were added and Ionic columns (not the present marble ones) were placed on either side of the chancel. The altar, constructed of moulded terra cotta, was topped with the slab of marble from the original communion table. At this time a new organ was installed.

The builders of the additions were Dearing and Johnson of Washington; the decorator was John P. Wies of New York. The stenciled designs on the old section remained and were continued into the chancel extension. In 1873 Madame Veuve Lorin of Chartres, France, visited the church and began preparing designs for the stained glass windows; Mr. N. H. Eggleston of New York worked on the execution and installation of the windows. Memorial windows continued to be added until 1937 or later /Stained Glass, Winter Issue 1961-62/.

The vestry considered "removing the stairs from the main vestibule, and constructing a stairway to the gallery floor in a new building. They were advised by Mr. Renwick that this could be most appropriately done by removing the inappropriate bell tower from astride the roof, and constructing a campanile which would accord with the architecture of the church But its expense was too great They adopted a simpler and less expensive way of reaching the gallery floor" /Report of the Committee on Stained Glass, 1883/.

The exact nature of the stair construction referred to above is not clear; however a photograph date 1888 (?) shows the stairway wing added to the north side of the main vestibule. The stairway wing to the south side was added later, probably before 1900. On the north-east corner of the church a third story was added to the structure above the organ loft and study; a continuous roof sloped from the north edge of the three-story structure to the south eave of the chancel.

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d. Period 1919-1920. The firm of McKim, Mead and White of New York were employed to prepare plans for remodeling and restoring the exterior and interior of the church. The work at this time included: a concrete slab on the main level replacing the old wood construction, addition of consolled buttresses on the exterior of the transepts, removal of the doorways on either side of the main doorway, refinishing the rear wall of the chancel with marble wainscot, replacing the flanking Ionic columns with marble columns, and redecorating the interior of the dome.

e. Period 1950-1961. Changes were made in 1950 in the basement, and heating and air-conditioning units were installed. In 1955, while painting was in progress, it was found that the masonry arches supporting the wood frame of the dome were showing cracks, and the supporting piers were spreading. Under the direction of Horace W. Peaslee, FAIA, the arches were strengthened with shaped steel members and tie rods; and across the nave two tie rods were added. Except for slight widening of the arches, the basic design of the structure remained unchanged. Buckingham House had been acquired for church offices, and at this time the three-story structure on the north side of the chancel of the church was removed and replaced with a two-story loft to house a new organ; a one-story sacristy and robing room with a connection to Buckingham house was included.

6. Important old views, sketches, plans; (prints and copy negatives of the following are on file in the HABS archives).

a. Original plan sheet, showing floor framing, ground and balcony seating, signed by B. H. Latrobe. Framed in the office of the Rector, St. John's Church Offices, 1525 H Street NW.

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b. Watercolor sketch of the original St. John's Church and the fire-damaged White House, made by Latrobe in 1816. Original framed in the Rector's office.

c. Sketch of St. John's Church and Lafayette square area by Juillet dated 1822. A photographic copy hangs in the sacristy area of the church.

d. Photo interior view of the chancel dated 1860 (?). Original photo in the St. John's archives.

e. Photo view of church interior showing late 19th century stenciled decoration and the extended chancel after additions of 1883. Original photo in the St. John's archives.

f. Photo exterior view dated 1888 (?) showing the addition of the north stairway wing. Original photo in the St. John's archives.

g. Photo exterior view showing addition of the south stairway wing. (No date, probably about the turn of the century). Original photo in the St. John's archives.

7. Significant publications:

a. Books: Journal of Latrobe, by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, D. Appleton and Company, 1905; John H. B. Latrobe and His Times by J. E. Semmes, Norman Remington Company, 1917; Benjamin Henry Latrobe by Talbot Hamlin, Oxford University Press, 1955; Report of the Committee on Stained Glass, St. John's Church, Washington, D. C., October 16, 1883.

b. Pamphlets, Periodicals: History and Reminiscences of St. John's Church, Washington, D. C., 1816-1905 by Alexander B. Hagner, copy in St. John's archives; Benjamin Henry Latrobe and His Churches, paper by Thomas T. Waterman, February 10, 1939, on file in HABS archives; Historical Stained Glass Windows in the Church of the Presidents by Gertrude Orr in Stained Glass, Winter Issue 1961-62;

"A Specification of 1815" in Journal of the American Institute of Architects, December 1954; Address Delivered at the Opening St. John's Church, Washington, D. C., November 4, 1883" by the Rector (Rev. William A. Leonard), copy in the St. John's archives.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

When the church was completed and consecrated in 1816 President James Madison was one of the first parishioners and a new (now numbered 64) was designated by the vestry for use of the presidents and their families. President Madison's wife, Dolly, was baptized, as an adult, confirmed and then buried from the church. Presidents James Monroe, John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Zachary Taylor and Chester A. Arthur all attended services regularly or were active members. Presidents Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt and others attended services on occasion.

PART II ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: The architectural character of the original (Greek Cross) church can be visualized by observing the transepts, the central area, the dome and the cupola. Although no doubt modified by subsequent remodelings, the simplified Graeco-Roman forms as signed by Latrobe are excellent examples of his work. The simple classic details, and the shallow chancel with emphasis on the preaching space are characteristic of his architectural and religious philosophy. The extension of the nave, the addition of the tower (Georgian in character), and the addition of the portico probably did not conform to the ideas of the original architect. In the last half of the 19th century there were changes in interior decoration, but restorations in this century follow the spirit of the original design.
2. Condition of the Fabric: Excellent; well maintained.

B. Technical Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall Dimensions:
2. Foundations and Cellar: Original foundation walls of brick. A cellar for the first furnace was excavated in 1842, and it has been enlarged several times in this century to accommodate mechanical equipment.
3. Floor Construction: Original wood floors under pews were on wood joists; walkways between pews were of brick. In 1842 a wood floor was built about one foot above the original floor level. A concrete slab, covered with wood flooring, was constructed in 1919.
4. Wall Construction: Solid brick with exterior stucco finish.
5. Exterior Buttresses: Masonry buttresses with decorative consoles added in 1919 at corners of the transepts.
6. Portico on West Front: Sandstone steps and floor; six Tuscan columns of masonry, stuccoed; wood entablature. Portico added with nave extension in 1820.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Main (west) doorway, with simple wood mouldings, is probably similar to that of the original structure; however, the entablature head has been modified in recent reconstruction. The H Street (south) entrance was added in 1883, and the front (west) stair entrances were added soon afterward. All Exterior doors are six panel; many have the upper panel glazed.
 - b. Windows: The early double-hung wood sash have been replaced with pivoted metal stained-glass windows. The lunar windows apparently follow the original Latrobe design, but have been replaced with metal sash.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, Covering: Hipped roof over square central portion; gabled over chancel, transepts and nave; slate shingle covering. New adjacent additions flat roofed with built-up roofing.
- b. Framing: Not visible; four segmented brick arches support wood framing which forms the dome over the central portion. Wood trusses over the chancel, transepts and nave support the plastered vault forms.
- c. Cornice, eaves: On the main structure stuccoed masonry forms used to the top of the frieze; wood cornice with simplified modillions above. Metal gutters form the upper cornice at the major eaves.
- d. Cupola: Retains the lines of Latrobe's original design. Base metal-covered; drum with pilasters of wood; dome metal-covered with gold leaf. Curved stained-glass windows have exterior storm windows.
- e. Tower: Stuccoed brick walls to base of lower louvers; heavy wood frame above covered with wood; wood louvers at second and third levels. Bell, weighing 667 pounds, at second level; loud-speakers for mechanical chimes at third level. Cornices and roof metal-covered; dome in gold leaf.

C. Technical Description of Interiors:

1. Floor Plans: Ground floor with balcony; originally a Greek Cross plan (1816) with nave extended, vestibule and portico added (1820); chancel extended and alcove to south added (1883). Organ loft and areas for sacristy and robing room rebuilt in 1955.
2. Stairways: In the original structure the stairs were in the front within the Greek Cross. Stair in north wing added in 1880's; south stair soon afterward. Wood handrails, newels and plain thin wood balusters.

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3. Flooring: Wood flooring with brick aisles on ground floor of original church. Present flooring wood over concrete slab; aisles carpeted.
4. Finish of Walls and Ceilings: Walls plastered on brick masonry; ceilings plastered on wood framing. Decorative moulded plaster on interior of dome added in 1919. Wood wainscot (4') on transepts and nave; marble wainscot (10') on east wall of chancel. Entrance vestibule panelled in wood.
5. Doorways and Doors: Double doors flanking chancel, four-panel; installed in additions of 1883.
6. Trim: Pilaster caps and moulding at base of ceiling vaulting formed of plaster. Wood mouldings at doors, windows, etc. Cast iron decorative units on the balcony railing date from 1842.
7. Hardware: Butt hinges of cast iron (19th century) and steel (20th century).
8. Lighting: Electrically-lighted large, decorative chandelier suspended from ceiling of cupola, not shown in photos of late 19th century. Chancel lighted with flood lamps; palladian window lighted externally with flood lights.
9. Heating: Originally heated with wood stoves; cellar with furnaces added in 1842; radiators added later. Present heating and air-conditioning units under windows and the equipment in cellar added in 1951.

D. Site:

1. General Setting and Orientation: Across LaFayette Square (park) from the White House, on northeast corner lot. Frontage on 16th Street 75.32 feet; 99.68 feet on H Street. Church built to west, south and east property lines; west portico extends into

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right-of-way of 16th Street. Originally a cemetery to north of church; remains were removed in 1859 to Rock Creek Cemetery and Christ Church cemetery. Properties in the same block that were used for Rectory and garden were exchanged in 1955 for the Buckingham House property.

2. Enclosures: None
3. Outbuildings: Buckingham House, once the British Legation where Lord Ashburton and Daniel Webster signed the Canadian boundary treaty in 1842, stands on the lot to the eastward of the church. It was acquired and restored for use as church offices, and a connecting passage to the church was built.
4. Walks, Etc.: Pavement of sandstone in front area added recently. Walks are of exposed-aggregate concrete.
5. Landscaping: Limited in space, but attractively designed and maintained.

Prepared by Melvin M. Rotsch
Supervising Architect
NCDIC, National Park Service
Washington, D. C.
August 1962

St. John's Church
Sixteenth and H Streets, N. W.
Washington, D. C.

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The following paper bearing the title "Benjamin Henry Latrobe and His Churches", was prepared and read at St. John's Church by the architectural historian, Thomas T. Waterman, February 10, 1939. Because of its high research value it has been prepared in this form for preservation among the HABS Archives.

To understand the architecture of Latrobe it is necessary to know something of his family and cultural background, and to realize that his early years in London fully formed his taste and architectural style. When he came to this country in 1796 at the age of twenty-eight he was entirely aware of the manner in which he wished to work, and here divorced from the influence of contemporary buildings in what he considered the current style, he evolved his own masterly interpretation of what is called the Graeco-Roman Revival.

In a way Latrobe was an ascetic; he disregarded personal discomfort, he was a tireless worker, he was an abstainer and he despised ostentation. These are logical results of his family background and early life. His parents were Moravians, his father an English bishop of that church and his mother a daughter of Henry Antes, the great Moravian leader in Pennsylvania. Latrobe was sent to a religious school in Germany when he was eleven and later attended the University of Leipzig. This background of evangelical

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protestant teaching probably was responsible for his insistence on simplicity in architecture. That this was his conscious goal in design is illustrated by an anecdote Latrobe related in his Journal. He wrote, "The highest encomium and the most flattering I ever received relative to my architectural efforts, was in regard to the Bank of Pennsylvania. Walking up Second Street I observed two French officers standing opposite the building and looking at it without saying a word. I stepped into Black's shop and stood close to them. After some time one of them exclaimed several times, 'C'est beau, et si simple' I do not recollect distinctly anything that has given me so much particular satisfaction."

As a matter of current style the form his architectural expression would have taken if he had come to maturity twenty years earlier would have been the Palladian of Inigo Jones, a quiet and scholarly revival of Roman forms. As it was, he came to London in 1786, at the height of popular enthusiasm for the Classic architecture of Greece. This was the medium he adopted as his own and in which he has left as an heritage of unique beauty.

Already a university graduate and well travelled at twenty he came to London with unusual educational equipment and a brilliant mind. How he came to take up architecture is not known but it may have been through Smeaton the great engineer, who came from Leeds the home of the Latrobes, and may have known the family there. At least it is known that Latrobe studied engineering under Smeaton,

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who was an antiquary as well, and architecture under Cockrell, a pioneer of the Greek Revival. The initiator of the new style was James Stuart, who, with Nicholas Revett published a book on the antiquities of Athens in 1762. This volume, sponsored by the Society of the Dilletanti, produced a sensation in English artistic circles and formed the foundation for the Greek Revival. Both Stuart and Revett must have been known to Latrobe, probably personally, or at least through their works.

We are fortunate in having Latrobe's own declaration of his architectural principles in a letter to Jefferson, dated 1807. He wrote, "My principles of good taste are rigid in Greek architecture. I am a bigoted Greek in the condemnation of the Roman architecture of Baalbec, Palmyra, Spaletro, and of all the buildings erected subsequent to Hadrian's reign. The immense size, the bold plan and arrangements of the buildings of the Romans down almost to Constantine's arch I admire with enthusiasm, but think their decorations and details absurd beyond tolerance Wherever, therefore, the Grecian style can be copied without impropriety, I love to be a mere, I should say a slavish, copyist, but the forms and the distribution of the Roman and Greek buildings which remain are in general applicable to the objects and uses of our public buildings. Our religion requires churches

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wholly different from the temples, our Government, our legislative assemblies, and our courts of justice, buildings of entirely different principles from their basilicas; and our amusements could not possibly be performed in their theatres or amphitheatres. But that which principally demands a variation in our buildings from those of the ancients is the difference of our climate."

Latrobe's works illustrate his adherence to his principles. It is interesting to note in them an extraordinary affinity to the works of his English contemporary, Robert Adam, and to see in the comparison Latrobe's position vindicated. Adam, son of a Scotch architect, measured and published drawings of Diocletian's Palace at Spalato, and subsequently established in London an architectural practice of vast proportions. His style was based on the late Roman Classic style, and while his buildings were often extremely noble in the disposition of their elements, they were nearly always covered with intricate overlays of ornament. The ornament was usually of great beauty of design, modeling and painting, but it sapped the vitality of the architecture itself. Adam's work in Edinburgh is in a way his finest, as here in the sombre north he eliminated most of the ornament and relied purely on form for his result. This is exactly an illustration of Latrobe's point of view, and it is really amazing to find how much in common there is between

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the work of the two architects if they are compared for general design alone. You can well imagine Latrobe paraphrasing his criticism of the late Roman work to apply to that of Robert Adams

Latrobe and Adam were members of that small but inspired group of men who through the ages have made architecture their vocation or avocation and whose virtuosity has raised them to great heights in the scientific and artistic life of their countries. In Italy Michelangelo is an example, in England Inigo Jones and Christopher Wren, and in this country Jefferson and Latrobe.

In his childhood Latrobe's inclination toward architecture was manifest. When he was at school in Yorkshire at the age of ten he made a drawing of Kirkstall Abbey, said to be remarkable for its accuracy in the portrayal of the architecture. This is also an early indication of the great facility he was to develop as a draftsman. Throughout his life he found delight in sketching, painting and drafting. At his death he left behind him almost countless numbers of sketches, water colors and rendered drawings of great finesse and beauty. These ranged in scope from rough free hand vignettes to the superb rendered perspective, in full color, of the Baltimore Cathedral. In his frequent journeys about the country on his professional projects he would while away evenings spent in country taverns with sketching his fellow travellers. On his sea trip to New Orleans he made spirited drawings of ships that were sighted and

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of scenes along the Mississippi. Latrobe was not only an artist bent on interpreting the beauty and life he saw, but he was an indefatigable and accurate technical draftsman, who produced not only mechanical drawings of the most intricate variety, but one who had the power to bring to them beauty as well. An example of this in the Library of Congress is his fine rendered drawing of the Frigate house, proposed by Jefferson. This is a completely informing architectural drawing, which has great beauty of line and color, and charmingly drawn attributes. In his Journal Latrobe said, "The architect indeed requires all the imagination of the painter but when imagination has done her duty, her aid is no longer wanted, and to a moment of enthusiasm succeeded months of dry mechanical labor in drawing and the more dry and tedious application to it of calculations. When the castle in the air has been made to descend into the office, and such constructions in writing and drawing shall guide the hard hand and iron tool of the mechanic imagination is only busy to distract." That Latrobe was not merely generalizing about the tedious part others took in the drafting of construction drawings is made clear in a letter to Jefferson which told the President that the supervision of work at the Capitol took so much of his time that he had to make the working drawings at home in the evening.

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In addition to his abilities as an architect and artist he was an engineer of outstanding ability, structural, civil, and mechanical. His early training under Smeaton included supervision of canal construction. This was to stand him in good stead when he built the canal across Washington from Tiber Creek to the Eastern Branch and when he worked on the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal. Perhaps his greatest engineering feat was the design and construction of the Philadelphia Waterworks in 1799. In Washington there is impressive evidence of his skill in architectural engineering in the construction of the Capitol, especially evident in the vast system of masonry arches and vaults in the substructure. In his practical architectural work he acquired a substantial reputation for the accuracy of his estimates of cost and for his excellent management of the financial side of building operations. In contrast to these attainments he was a musician, an organist in this church, and a writer of fine prose.

The object of this paper is especially to discuss Latrobe's church architecture as exemplified by St. John's and his other church structures, now extant; the Roman Catholic Cathedral, the Unitarian Church and St. Mary's Seminary Chapel all in Baltimore; St. Paul's Church, Alexandria; and Christ Church, Washington. Two of these buildings were designed by Latrobe in collaboration with Maximilian Godefroy; these were the two minor Baltimore structures. From what

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Latrobe tells us in his Journal we know he felt that the Classic temple was not adaptable to Christian uses. His was the attitude of the evangelical protestant which allowed no place for the mystical in worship and conceived of the church not as a sanctuary but rather a preaching place. His churches were meeting houses, not unlike in plan those built by the congregationalists in Massachusetts in the 17th century. He required an open preaching space, unencumbered by piers and columns and a central pulpit; but an alcove considered adequate for a chancel. Except for the two structures he built for the Roman Catholic Church in Baltimore, none of his churches had other than the most elementary provisions for the liturgy of the holy communion. It is an interesting fact that all of his churches except two have had the chancels extended in recent years. In St. John's this was done in 1883. In his quest for an interior unobstructed by piers or columns, Latrobe was sometimes frustrated by the wide span of his building, which required intermediate support. When this was necessary as at the Baltimore Cathedral he insisted that the aisle arcades should merely be passages, not wide aisles with pews. In this case the building committee ordered the widening of the aisles without Latrobe's knowledge. The obstruction the piers then offered to the vision of people sitting in the aisles so concerned him that he replanned the crossing at the transepts to an octagonal form to eliminate the angle piers.

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The original form of St. John's was the perfect exposition of his ideas, both practical and artistic, in church building. The plan was cruciform, with equal arms, such as the cross of the Eastern Church displayed. The north and south transepts are exactly as he planned them, and they were repeated to the east for the chancel and to the west for the nave. These shallow arms extending from a central rotunda provided the close knit, unobstructed space he required. The communion table he placed against the east wall, not even in a projecting bay, and enclosed it by a closely set communion rail. Directly in front of the communion table in the center of the chancel arch he set the pulpit, entirely visible by all of the congregation. The gallery was not at all as at present, but was circular in form repeating the line of the dome above. This gallery filled the nave, transepts and even one-half of the chancel, extending as it did to the east wall on either side of the communion table. The organ was then over the west door in the gallery.

Just what suggested this very unusual plan to him is hard to say, but in London there are several churches by Wren that employ the Greek cross scheme, but in all cases the plan is square with the dome carried on columns at the crossing. The Pantheon in London built by Watt in 1770 is a closer parallel, though much larger. This building has the same cruciform ground plan, with galleries in the arms of the cross. Another possibility as to the source is in the Chapel at Aylot St. Lawrence, Herefordshire, built by Nicholas Revett.

This is a parallel to the original plan of St. John's, though it has a large eastern apse, and a western narthex and portico, as St. John's now has through an alteration. Last, but not the most impossible source of the design, knowing as we do that Latrobe traveled in Europe, is in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, an 8th century building. Except for the fact that the nave of this building is longer than the other arms it is a complete exposition of the design elements of St. John's, both in plan and elevation.

A drawing in the Library of Congress by Latrobe indicates St. John's Church in the distance of a view of the White House. It shows the four equal arms of the building covered by pediments and the crossing rising above the pediments. The square of the crossing is covered, as at present, by a hipped roof from which springs the cupola. This is precisely the arrangement of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, except that the cupola is lacking.

The use of a cupola here is very interesting as we have Latrobe's own comments on the subject of cupolas in the letter to Jefferson in which he expounded his principles of architecture. He wrote, "In respect to the general subject of cupolas, I do not think they are always, nor even often, ornamental the need of a belfry, which is an Eastern accession to our religious buildings, renders them necessary appendages to the church, yet I cannot admit that because the Greeks and Romans did not place elevated cupolas upon their temples, they may not when necessary be also rendered beautiful.

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The question would be as to its real or apparent utility in the place where it appeared; for nothing can be beautiful which appears useless or unmeaning. If our climate was such as to admit of the light of an open orifice in the crown of a dome, as at the Pantheon at Rome, I would never put a cupola or any spherical dome. It is not the ornament but the use I want."

We can see, then, that St. John's as originally built was Latrobe's thesis on church building. Unfortunately the building was not adequate for the needs of a growing congregation or for the revival of the English liturgy. In 1820, only five years after the first plans were made, the nave was extended to the west, with vestibules, portico, and tower, all previously lacking. The tradition of Latrobe's authorship of the new west end is persistent, but many things about the design do not substantiate the tradition. In its original form the scale of the building was excellent, but now it has a strange feeling of being dwarfed. This, perhaps, is due to the breaking up of the design into a great many units. For instance, originally Latrobe had single windows in the side walls; in the extension these were changed to triple windows and many more added. The south door was removed and a triple window added, as well as those in the nave. Perhaps the most serious defect of the design is in the spacing of the columns of the portico. There are six where there should be four, and as in Revett's comparable church in Herefordshire there actually are. The reason why the columns appear to be larger than they really are is because the

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lintels they bear are much shorter than they could be. It was not the Classic idea to have as many columns as possible, but to have as few as their materials would allow. Therefore, the span from column to column was as wide as the stone lintel would permit, which is obviously not the case with St. John's portico.

The interior of the church shows the results of successive changes, ranging in date, except for the chancel, from 1820 to 1840. Both gallery and pews are of the later Classic Revival period, the east iron column capitals having the lotus petals and the pew end ornaments the honeysuckle and the acanthus leaf. The stained glass windows are of course an addition and mainly date from 1883.

At the time Latrobe was at work on the design of St. John's the rector was Dr. Wilmer, who simultaneously had the parish of St. Paul in Alexandria. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Latrobe was the architect for the new St. Paul's church built in 1818. It is surprising, however, to find a building of such an entirely different flavor from St. John's. The plan is a simple rectangle, originally even without the projecting chancel it now has. The aisles are wide enough to contain galleries which are supported by the columns of a nave arcade. This church is important in the study of Latrobe's work in that it is built in the Gothic style, a radical departure from Latrobe's Graeco-Roman Revival. In spite of his avowed bigotry in favor of Greek, he had designed Sedgley Mansion, near Philadelphia, for William Cramond, in the Gothic style, in 1799.

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When he submitted drawings for the proposed cathedral to Bishop Carroll in 1806, he made alternative designs in the Classic and Gothic styles. Fortunately the Classic scheme was accepted, but Latrobe evidently treasured the idea of a Gothic church and in 1808 designed Christ Church, Washington, in this manner. In spite of alterations as drastic as those to St. John's, Christ Church maintains at least on the exterior, the original intent of the design. The plan is rectangular, with thin cast iron columns supporting the ceiling, which has a barrel vault over the nave. The building is lighted by a fine series of windows, with well designed wood tracery, containing excellent contemporary grisaille glass with colored borders. The exterior is in traditional, if not well understood English Gothic, with a tower rising from the roof over the entrance. This has all the features found in books on the style of the period; buttresses, wood pinacles, tracery ornament and battlements.

While Christ Church has more the appearance of an English perpendicular Gothic church, and perhaps is superior to St. Paul's in design, the latter has an arresting facade, reminiscent of that of Peterborough Cathedral. Three equal arches rising the full height of the building below the gable create a shallow porch, through which the church is entered. This is a development of a motive that Latrobe had proposed for the Cathedral in Baltimore where the western porch was within an heroic open arch, which above the door framed a magnificent tracery window. Here a rich parapet screened the roof, but at

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St. Paul's Church the gable was too large to be screened so was expressed on the front in a great stepped gable pierced with circular windows.

In his churches Latrobe, the architect, has revealed Latrobe, the man, in many ways. We see in his emphasis on the preaching space, his evangelistic leanings; in the suppression of the chancel, his dislike of ceremonial; and in his selection as the architect of the Roman Catholic Cathedral, his tolerance, both objective and subjective. A Moravian by inheritance and education he nevertheless endeared himself to men of all branches of Christianity, yet he wrote, "The French revolutionary principles has made religious profession fashionable, but the effect of this impious farce upon my own mind is to make me retire with the more humility into my own heart and seek there a temple unprofaned by external dictation."

Suggested Reference: Harold Donaldson Eberlein and Cortlandt Van Dyke Hubbard, Historic House of George-Town and Washington City, Richmond, 1958, pp. 248-58.

Prepared by: Worth Bailey, HABS Historian, June, 1961

Approved by

Charles H. Loring
Acting Chief Architect

Date 6/20/61

ADDENDUM TO
SAINT JOHN'S CHURCH
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This report is an addendum to 31 data pages previously transmitted to the Library of Congress.

Additional research conducted in 2006 by Marilyn Ibach of the Library of Congress found that a portion of the original written historical and descriptive data was incorrect. In particular, on page 12 of the previously transmitted history, Section 6.c., the sketch of St. John's Church is not attributed properly. Juillet did not create it but rather Juillet refers to the month, July, in which the sketch was completed in 1822. The proper creator is Baroness Anne Marguerite Henriette de Marigny Hyde de Neuville. The caption for photograph HABS DC-19-26 was changed to reflect this information as well.

Verification came from the Junior League's book, "The City of Washington," pages 128 and 130, as well as from the Dolley Madison archive.

Submitted by: Jennifer Hall, Heritage Documentation Programs Collections Manager,
September 19, 2006.